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THEOLOGICAL RE-ADJUSTMENTS.

THE question to be discussed looks not toward any possible re-ordering of the Creeds of Christendom with a view to their mutual reconciliation, but, having regard to the marked divergencies of educated thought and feeling, to-day, from lines prescribed by orthodox authorities for Christian thinking and living, it is proposed to consider whether the time is not come for a frank restatement of the theological position by those having the right to give judgment in such matters; whether it were not well that representative acknowledgment be made of certain certified results of modern criticism and science, seriously affecting certain conclusions supposed to be essential to the integrity of Christian faith, so that a better understanding might be had with men who have repudiated that faith mainly through misrepresentations of its spirit and essential precepts. This end would be attained by eliminating from the *credenda* of the churches all that is unworthy of "the mind that was in Christ;" remitting all things of uncertain obligation to the sphere of opinion; resolutely dismissing all claims upon our reverence or respect that have been discredited by the more thorough and more conscientious scholarship of the current century; so delivering multitudes of men and women in and about our churches from confusion and embarrassment, while depriving the noisy infidelity of the time of its most effective weapons.

Yet to these demands for larger scope for the play of religious opinion, the rulers of our Christian synagogues will probably answer with indignation, many of them having but dim conceptions of the trouble that is abroad outside the circles in which they chiefly "live and move and have their being." It is not a hopeful sign for men impregnated with the spirit of the time, looking in sorrow on the increasing alienation between

rationalism and a traditional religionism, and longing for some worthy attempt at re-adjusting old formulæ to new truths, to see how laboriously "councils," "synods," "convocations," occupy themselves in simply dusting ecclesiastical furniture, so to speak; or in oiling ecclesiastical machinery, or in supplying bits of new gearing in place of the broken or worn out; comfortably oblivious of the threatening condition of things without. Men of a steady stolid conservatism mostly, the members of these conclaves shrink from the most timid suggestions of change in the economy they administer; have a horror of everything that might disturb "the peace of the church," believing fervently in the maxim: "*Stare decisis, et quæta non movere.*" Such men stand for the past, for the things that have been tried, and that have stood the trial so well, as they think. When doubt or contradiction is abroad, they come together to re-affirm the old with increase of emphasis, or to threaten with a heavier and speedier damnation the men who begin to be restive under the old dogmatic restraints; going home with a serene satisfaction at heart that the kingdom of God is safe for another interval! Meanwhile the great outside world goes staggeringly on, through much confusion of thought and tribulation of heart, toward some far-off end of which the wise man knows little more than the densely ignorant; the latest "syllabus," or "pastoral address," shedding little light on the way. It is proper, of course, that the custodians of "the truth" should be jealous of the intrusion of heresies; but it is pitiful to perceive what very narrow notions ecclesiastical councils usually form of what they call "truth"; very pitiful is it to mark the insensibility which commonly prevails in them, as to the new social and intellectual conditions and forces to which men are to-day subject; and that they should be so strangely unaware of the friction, mostly silent, going on at the very foundations of our still fair-looking religious structures—something to be dreaded much more than the most desperate open assault.

Men of intelligence and moral sensibility, retaining faith in God, find grave occasions for trouble in the contemplation of such a state of things, seeing how seriously Christianity itself is thus compromised in the popular estimation. Yet is there one fact of hopeful significance, that is daily attaining more pronounced expression, in the discrimination men are making as to the proper office and function of theology. It is simply mar-

velous to mark what a space theologies have filled in history, and what authority they have arrogated and exerted over the thought and activities of the world; the assumption having prevailed throughout Christendom, very generally, down to our own time, that whatever theology asserted was to be received without question, how hard or insulting soever to the natural reason or conscience of mankind. The very confusion and frequent conflict between rival theological systems themselves ought to have shaken men's confidence, one might think, in the authority of those systems, or in the infallibility practically claimed for their conclusions; but, appealing to human nature at its weakest points, as they did, and backed by arguments of a sort which few men had the courage to answer, theological *dicta* were accepted by almost all in silence, if not with inward submission, only here a man and there one daring to provoke the penalties which theologians always had in reserve for the crime of freethinking. Theology seldom plies its old coercive constraints over men's minds to-day, or only in places where intellectual light and liberty are late in coming; yet, through the law of heredity, I suppose, the old habit of unreasoning acquiescence survives to some extent still; though the right of holding belief in suspense, at least, under dogmatic dictation, is asserted by increasing numbers in even orthodox "folds"; while a few resent openly the intrusion of authority upon the deliberations of the personal intelligence and conscience.

It may seem strange that one whose faith in Christianity is still firm should see in the increase of such skepticism a hopeful sign for the future of Christ's religion; yet is it only through deliverance from the bewilderment in which theologies have involved Christendom,—men coming to care less and less for the errors or extravagancies of which theology may be convicted,—that the real issues between faith and unbelief can come into clear view, and that the Gospel of Jesus Christ can have fair opportunity to commend itself to the reason and conscience of mankind. Very refreshing is it, therefore, to observe from this point of view, how much more lightly theological systems weigh to-day upon the hopes and fears of the world than they once did; to note the decline of the spirit of passive obedience, once all but universally prevalent; and to mark the free handling to which church dogmas are now compelled to

submit: men trained in the severest orthodoxies speaking freely to-day of "the theological renaissance" now on; of an existing need for Christian thought to "re-arrange its faiths in new lights"; of "a full adjustment between reason and Christianity to be steadily sought."

The truth is thus slowly emerging into wider recognition, that theologies are simply formulated opinions about God and things pertaining to God; or that they are philosophies elaborated out of, or woven round, the great facts of human consciousness and experience, together with other facts received through tradition and testimony of an alleged supernatural origin and authority. Thus viewed, no man of intelligence and fair feeling will refuse theology patient hearing; but neither will he yield it a blind submission, but will apply to it tests to which all philosophies have had to submit; and this he will do with the more rigor to theological schemes, knowing the fascination which the facts underlying theology have had for weak, or dis-tempered, or abnormally emotional natures. He knows how powerfully such facts appeal to the imagination and to rapturous feeling, so setting all the requirements of exact thinking at defiance often; logic being beguiled by sentiment, the judgment unsettled by inflamed affection, reason uttering itself in the language of poetry. There is little occasion for wonder that theologies should be so often found by the cold, critical intellect to be full of strange or extravagant conceits. Learning or reflecting upon these things, reasonable men cease to regard theologies as final and exhaustive explanations of all that nature holds, or that life reveals, of mystery, some of those long and very widely revered filling one with a shuddering awe at times, by the familiarity they affect with the secret ways and workings of Almighty God; as witness the so-called creed of St. Athanasius.

These remarks are meant to lead up to the conclusion that theologies must surrender the claim to infallibility they have practically asserted so long; that they must cease to insist upon the absolute finality of their decisions; leaving men's thoughts to play freely round the few great facts which Christian Revelation supplies as a basis for faith; looking with complacency upon the largest variety of opinion that may appear in the interpretation and application of those facts: the office and function of theology coming to be regarded as advisory, and not dictatorial. "A very mild, ineffectual sort of conclusion," some men may say;

but a conclusion of far-reaching practical consequence, as I venture to think. How much a general and hearty recognition of it might do to allay sectarian animosities, and to prevent destructive hostilities between the churches! How harmless many of the assaults of infidelity upon Christian truth would come to be esteemed, when it should be clearly and generally perceived that such assaults were inspired by, and aimed at, some theological misconception or perversion of Christian truth, as they often are, and not by or at anything essentially in that truth, or of it, at all. What man of discernment does not know that the unbelief, now so prevalent, finds most frequent occasion for objection or cavil just here? Is it not about time, then, that the religion of Jesus Christ should no longer be held responsible for the fanciful refinements, the conceits, the inhumanities, propagated and done in its name by dogmatic authorities in modern or in ancient times? What an immense relief it would be to crowds of Christian men could they get out of all confusion of mind so created, and from beneath all obligations imposed by irrational theologies, to defend things indefensible, and to reconcile things irreconcilable; the occasions for attempting such feats arising mainly from the creation and obtruding of false issues by dogmatic systems. Happily, the number of religious teachers is increasing who show discrimination in these matters, allowing the specialties of our motley-hued theologies to sink out of sight; insisting only, or almost wholly, upon claims that spring naturally out of the teaching of Jesus Christ; estimating all things attributed to Moses, or to the prophets, or that we have even from Christian apostles, according to the measure of their agreement with the spirit and precepts of the one Lord and Master. Let only such breadth of view and pliancy of faith continue to increase as of late in the religious world, and the occasions will be fewer for sectarian alienations, and for fear of the doings of an iconoclastic infidelity. Such a healthy latitudinarianism is penetrating all religious circles, and in it men of large liberal hopes see good augury for the future.

But the most pressing demands for the relaxation of dogmatic restraints, for a frank restatement of theological postulates and exactions, with a view to their re-adjustment to the demands of the time, come not from within the church, but from without; though many of her own teachers and apologists are secretly longing, I suspect, for relief to their own minds from embarrass-

ments springing out of the two-fold relation they sustain to the old and to the new; ingenuity being sorely taxed often in shaping other constructions for old theological formulæ than those they were meant to bear. But the chief occasions of the uneasiness felt just now by most thoughtful and observing Christian men are of a wider import and bearing. Two of these occasions I indicated in the early paragraphs of this paper, but must now discuss them at length.

Criticism has worked over very searchingly and thoroughly, as we know, the writings constituting the Book which we may still justly designate the Word of God—with what results is now known, in a general way, by all persons of tastes and accomplishments to fit them to judge in such matters. Criticism has confirmed the claims of those writings, in the main, to an exceptional character, justifying the confidence and veneration felt for them, by multitudes, as the media through which Almighty God has made known His will to men. But from where we stand now, we can see how a collection of documents such as those constituting the Bible,—of such manifold variety, representing nearly all stages and phases of human progress, from the very inception of civilization to a ripe maturity, and subjected, as the Biblical writings have been, to all sorts of conditions and contingencies likely to affect the purity and integrity of literary productions, and offering frequent temptation for scribes to import their own conceits and designs into them;—it ought not to seem strange, I say, to-day, whatever may be claimed for a divine superintendence and inspiration of the “sacred writers,” that a critical examination of such a collection of documents should reveal confusion, inconsistencies, doubtful traditions, with traces of mental and moral infirmity in the writers seemingly incompatible with the evidences we have of the workings of a Divine Spirit in them. But theology, more especially our early Protestant theology, in all its types, knew little of these things; or, under the influence of pious prepossessions, has resolutely ignored them; shaping for itself, and imposing upon all under its authority, an almost purely mechanical conception of the Bible, lacking the “sense of history,” with no perspective or proportion in the view it presented of the religious past of mankind. The Book, as so presented, had no natural history, so to speak; no law of growth or development was to be traced in its formation. The Divine inspiration was equal in

all ages, and in all the men who had part in the work of the Bible's construction; such part being that of serving as passive instruments merely under a supernatural energy. Every book in the compilation was where it was under Divine-direction, of the date assigned it, and from the person whose name it bore. The Bible was therefore to be accepted as a whole, every part being of equal authority, because inspired by one Spirit; the one great requisite for the right understanding of the Book being an absolute intellectual submission; all unmanageable items in it to be accepted as mysteries not to be inquired into. Now, coming to the Bible with such an estimate of its character and claims drilled into us by our theological instructors, all natural traits disappeared, of course, from the men and women we encountered in its pages; the judgment was confounded in trying to estimate their moral doings and deservings; hideous sins became saintly virtues; the morbid utterances of distempered minds had to be accepted as effusions of heavenly wisdom; all things "found in the Bible," unless expressly condemned, having equal claim to our reverence, because "inspired," and therefore "infallible."

Such was the judgment which men were taught to hold the Bible in, such was the mental attitude they were required to maintain toward it by orthodox theologies, the judgment and the requirement remaining unrescinded and unmodified in the "standards," "confessions," "catechisms," "articles of belief" of our churches to-day. But it need hardly be said that the judgment has been undermined, that the attitude is felt to be untenable by increasing numbers of men and women still in "good standing" in the churches; criticism having shown that uncertainty attaches to the "texts" of sacred Scripture in places; that interpolations are definable in various books; that mistakes have occurred in transcription; that passages have probably been colored in favor of ecclesiastical or theological "views" or pretensions. Nay, more than this will a competent, candid scholarship acknowledge to-day. It frankly confesses that some of the Biblical books are of doubtful date; that certain passages once reputed historical are of traditional authority only; that others are poetical delineations simply; and that many of the "prophecies" and "types," which expositors have found thickly strewn through the Old Testament, are purely fanciful in the meaning and application commonly put upon them. The Bible, in brief, under the handling of modern

criticism, is seen to be a more natural, more reasonable book, than the old artificial, orthodox view has represented; reflecting the lights and shadows of history; showing life as it was actually lived by men at various stages of the world's progress, under varying degrees of light, as recognizing different standards of morals and manners, and as subject to very varied formative conditions and forces. These conclusions of modern criticism may be startling to men of conservative views in our churches, but they are accepted by nearly all men of a thorough scholarly training to-day; few among them finding any serious difficulty in reconciling such conclusions with faith in the Bible as the organ of a Divine inspiration, or as witnessing to the workings of a Divine power in human history.

If, then, the well-established results of Biblical criticism just indicated be known to, and are admitted by, Christian scholars in their studies, why should the old mechanical conception of sacred Scripture be still taught in church formulas? Is it not about time that some deliberate representative attempt should be made to prevent the confusion and shame that ensue from two conflicting creeds as to these matters having currency among us — one, that of the enlightened cultivated few, and the other, that of the uninformed multitude? For the contradictions are painful and unsettling to the faith of vast numbers of men and women which are seen to exist between the views of the Bible given in the old orthodox "standards," and in the teachings of modern criticism. Young persons get, at home and in Christian schools, impressions of the Bible as a book every word of which was written under the direct dictation of the great God, and that every part is therefore absolutely free from all admixture of human error. But a little while later they learn, on going forth into life, that their early impressions are groundless; that the notion of "verbal inspiration" is an invention of theology; that mistakes of all sorts are detectable in the Scriptures as we have them to-day; on making which discoveries, some of those thus undeceived are tempted to impute pious fraud to their teachers and pastors. Then is there reason to fear that respect for all religious truth may go with the rejection of claims in behalf of the Bible which the church's best scholars have shown to be false. A good deal of the infidelity of men and women about us has a tone of angry resentment in it against the imposture, as it is counted, which was practiced

upon the ignorance and credulity of their youth. Is not the plea timely then; is it not reasonable and urgent for some authoritative restatement of the theological position of the time as it bears on these things; such a restatement as shall take away all occasion for double-dealing, whether with young or old minds; and such as shall relieve Christian men of all necessity for resorting to evasion or sophistry, when confronted with such well-established results of critical culture and research as discredit many things in the old orthodox estimate of the Bible?

But equally urgent are demands of a like purport coming from another quarter of the intellectual heavens. I shall at once be taken as hinting at the inroads which science is supposed to have made upon the domain of theology. A sense of weariness comes over one at times from being compelled to listen to so much loose talk, and to read so much ineffectual writing, on the "conflict" said to be raging just now between religion and science; the effect upon popular religious beliefs being very disastrous, it is said. All intelligent men have heard of the "bitter antagonism"; and some have gone and looked in upon the contest to discover the real occasions of the strife, trying to understand clearly the issues in debate, and what, if any, solid interests were involved. But most of these inquirers have come away somewhat bewildered, or angered, I suspect, by the confusion and misrepresentation prevailing over the whole field of the fight going on; science, or those speaking in the name of science, being desperately intent upon destroying a crazy-looking image they had set up bearing the name of religion; some being busy in answering the latest declamations of the anti-scientific pulpit, for which the scientists would persist in holding Christianity responsible,—after the manner of Mr. Huxley's making Moses responsible for the very imaginative cosmogony of John Milton,—while the other party to the "conflict," ecclesiastics, theologians, apologists, were dealing out emphatic denunciations of the wicked presumption of science, in daring to intrude upon "sacred" ground; the more vehement among them hurling horrible anathemas at the heads, or upon the souls, of their adversaries—all of which was very sad to see and hear. Yet that is the sort of thing that men commonly call "the conflict between religion and science." It is surely time that questions of such magnitude and moment as those involved in such conflict should be more worthily handled.

Specially is it desirable that the men representing religion in the debate should show themselves men of open minds, of pliant thought, manifesting all reasonable readiness to surrender positions no longer tenable.

Necessity for the actual doing of that was sure to arise, as the thoughts of men should widen "with the process of the suns." Theology, during the ages of her supremacy, intermeddled with all knowledge, putting her ban upon all free excursions of the human mind, and sitting as umpire in the decision of all controversies. Her proper province was the study and teaching of moral and spiritual truth. That did not satisfy her large ambition, however. Her right was unquestioned to control the intellect of the world under her rule along all lines of its operation, and to prescribe the conclusions it should reach, in virtue of an authority she claimed to hold direct from Almighty God. In the exercise of that prerogative the church put a fixed and an immutable meaning upon all things she found in sacred Scripture; whereas it was sure to ensue, in the progress of knowledge, that other constructions would be required for many Biblical statements, more especially for such as a later science would have to adjudicate and decide upon. In that presumptuous anticipation of all later growth and enlargement of the human mind was provided the chief occasion, the "*fons et origo*," of the trouble and strife existing to-day between science and religion.

But no intelligent man believes now in the right or the competence of the church to impose the opinions of her scholars, touching matters of which they were often densely ignorant, as articles of belief upon the reason and conscience of mankind. All men of right reason concede to-day that modern science must therefore be left free to prosecute its researches whithersoever it will, and to formulate the results at which it may arrive; the church accepting in a spirit of proper submission all such discoveries and conclusions as shall be shown to be duly authenticated; theology accommodating its prescriptions and demands accordingly. And science has already registered a sufficiency of such conclusions to require large re-adjustment of the old theological position, or of the parts affected thereby, in the light of to-day. Our religious guides must furnish some more rational interpretation than any now accessible, of the cosmogony and the anthropology ascribed to Moses; of the very narrow limits

of scriptural chronology compared with the cycles of ages required for the evolution of the present world-order; of the marvelous longevities claimed for "patriarchs"; of the phenomena of the deluge; of the philologically curious story of Babel; of the poetically grand, but scientifically incredible, account of the sun's sudden arrest upon Gibeon, and the moon's in the valley of Ajalon: all these, with many other such amazing matters must receive fitter treatment at the hands of religious apologists than they have hitherto received to justify the demands still preferred that men shall accept them as historically valid. Room will have to be found in the theological mind of the near future, probably, for such a conception of the method of Divine activity in "the constitution and course of nature" as shall be easily harmonized with the evolutionary hypothesis so rapidly establishing itself; the notion of frequent creations giving place to the conception of a primal creation with the endowment of quality and energy adequate to the attainment of all the ends at which creation was aimed; the notion of progress by sudden leaps yielding place to the idea of progress as a gradual and orderly ascent; the seemingly miraculous interventions upon the plan of Providence as unfolded in history coming to be regarded as natural displays of the Supreme power, only on a higher plan of operation, or as ruled by laws of whose action only occasional glimpses have been afforded to men. Failing to meet these demands, the church will have to allow those of her members of a more inquisitive and exacting order of mind than others to remit the more marvelous parts of the Biblical narrative to the sphere of tradition, or of poetry.

But have we not in this assertion of a right to the exercise of a large personal liberty in doubtful matters a just and adequate settlement of the whole question? "Why plead," it may be asked, "for any formal and express re-adjustment of decaying theologies to advancing knowledge at all? Why not let the drift in religious opinion away from old dogmatic moorings go on without calling attention to it?" To which question the answer is at hand: Because the drift carries away much more precious material than rejected bits of theology; the speculations of our Scribes being confounded with the doctrines of the Divine Master; for which confusion the Christian church is responsible, in claiming equal reverence from men for the

speculations as for the doctrines. The mischief hence resulting is immense. For little as the incredible pretensions and demands of theology obtrude themselves now upon the attention of the world, they do so sufficiently to offend men; and a man offended by foolish claims for which the church continues publicly to stand sponsor is under sore temptation to hear with indifference, or to reject with scorn, all that that church has to say in behalf of truths of immeasurable interest and consequence. Let the rulers and the rabbis look to it.

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